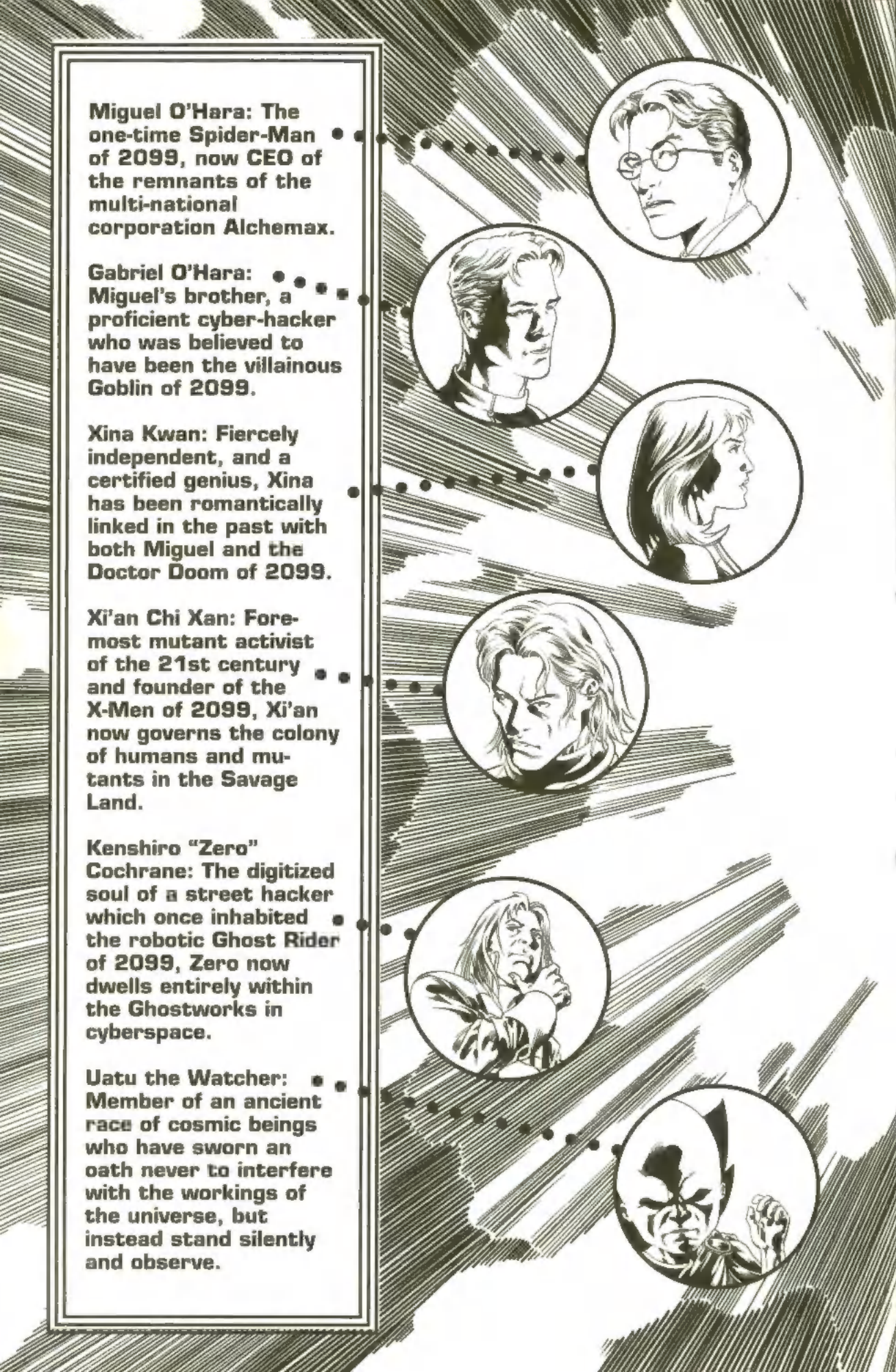
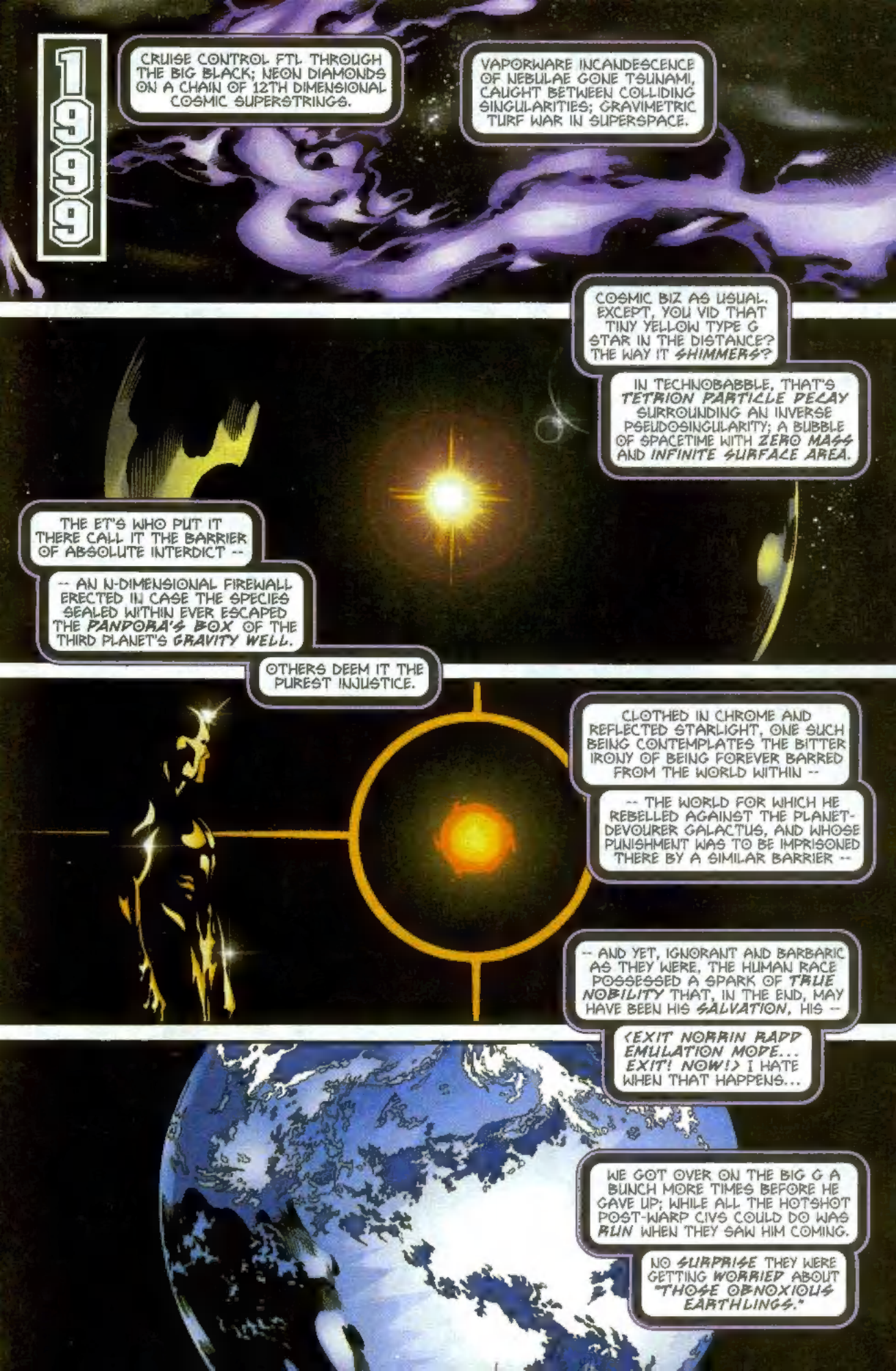
MARVEL COMICS®

MANIFEST DESTINY™

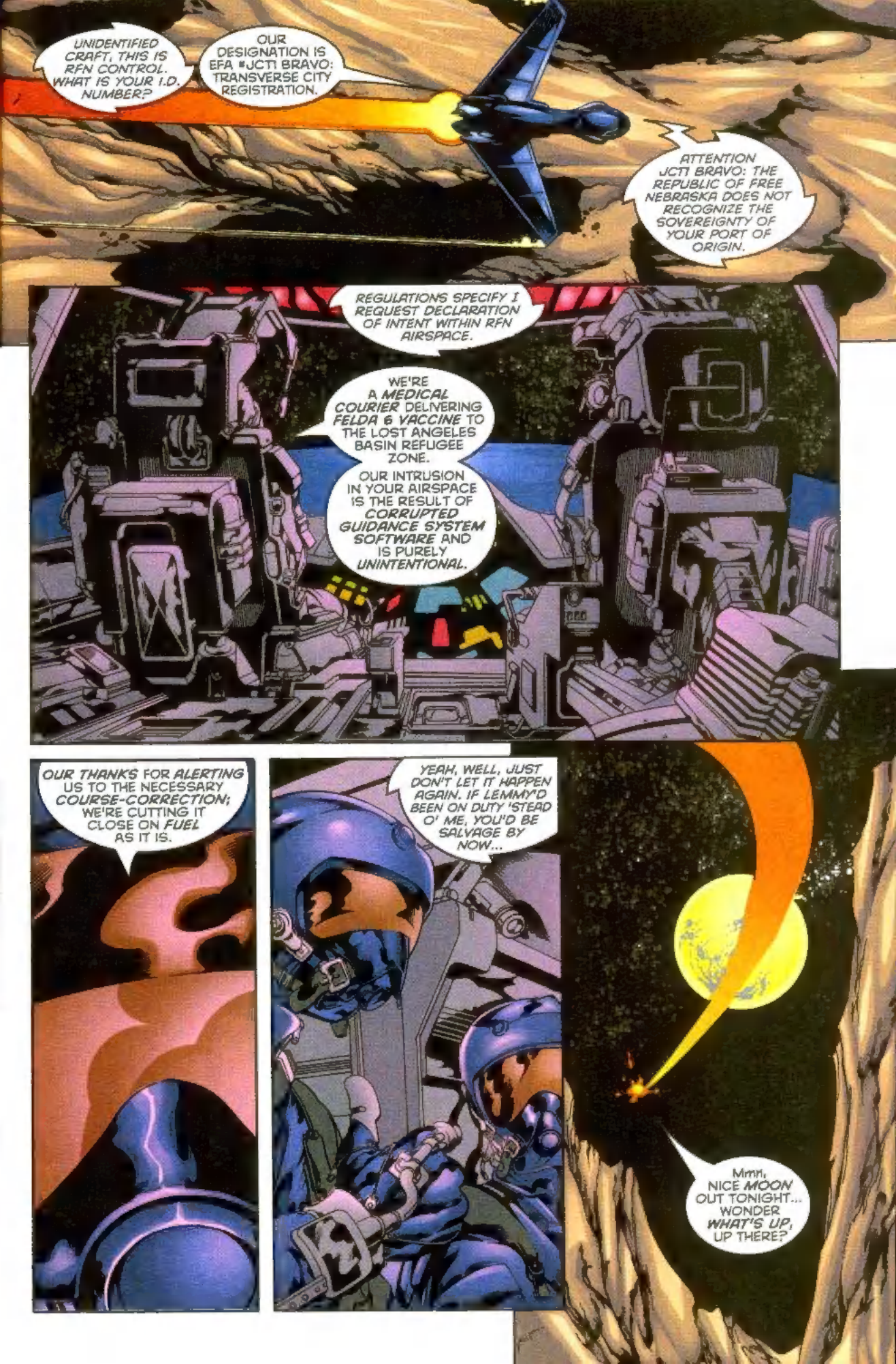
KAMINSKI • MCKONE • MCKENNA

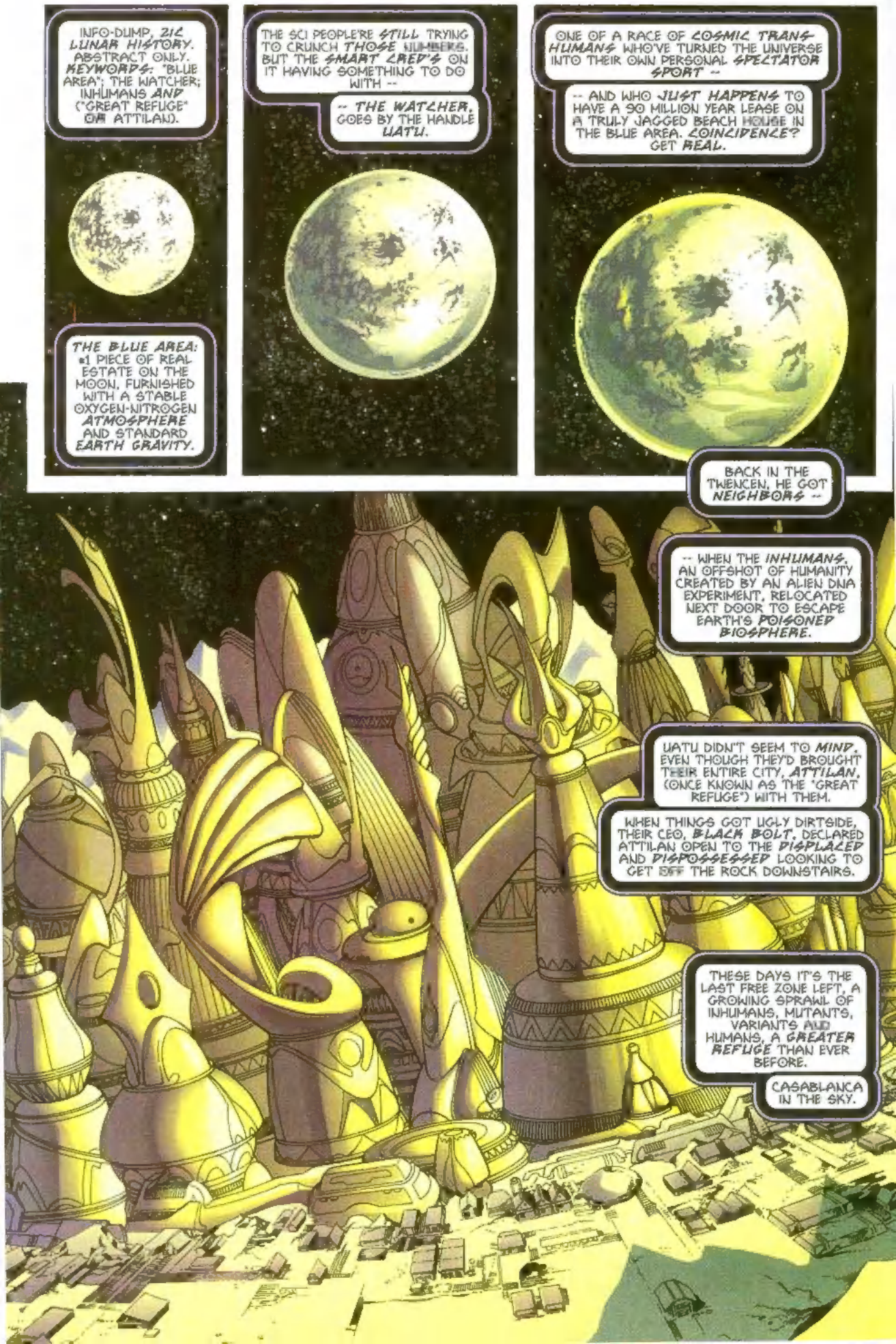

Miguel O'Hara: The one-time Spider-Man of 2099, now CEO of the remnants of the multi-national corporation Alchemax.
Gabriel O'Hara: Miguel's brother, a proficient cyber-hacker who was believed to have been the villainous Goblin of 2099.
Xina Kwan: Fiercely independent, and a certified genius, Xina has been romantically linked in the past with both Miguel and the Doctor Doom of 2099.
Xi'an Chi Xan: Foremost mutant activist of the 21st century and founder of the X-Men of 2099, Xi'an now governs the colony of humans and mutants in the Savage Land.
Kenshiro "Zero" Cochrane: The digitized soul of a street hacker which once inhabited the robotic Ghost Rider of 2099, Zero now dwells entirely within the Ghostworks in cyberspace.
Uatu the Watcher: Member of an ancient race of cosmic beings who have sworn an oath never to interfere with the workings of the universe, but instead stand silently and observe.


1999
CRUISE CONTROL FTL THROUGH THE BIG BLACK; NEON DIAMONDS ON A CHAIN OF 12TH DIMENSIONAL COSMIC SUPERSTRINGS.
VAPORWARE INCANDESCENCE OF NEBULAE GONE TSUNAMI, CAUGHT BETWEEN COLLIDING SINGULARITIES; GRAVIMETRIC TURF WAR IN SUPERSPACE.
COSMIC BIZ AS USUAL. EXCEPT, YOU VID THAT TINY YELLOW TYPE G STAR IN THE DISTANCE? THE WAY IT SHIMMERS?
IN TECHNOBABBLE, THAT'S TETRION PARTICLE DECAY SURROUNDING AN INVERSE PSEUDOSINGULARITY; A BUBBLE OF SPACETIME WITH ZERO MASS AND INFINITE SURFACE AREA.
THE ET'S WHO PUT IT THERE CALL IT THE BARRIER OF ABSOLUTE INTERDICT --
-- AN N-DIMENSIONAL FIREWALL ERECTED IN CASE THE SPECIES SEALED WITHIN EVER ESCAPED THE PANDORA'S BOX OF THE THIRD PLANET'S GRAVITY WELL.
OTHERS DEEM IT THE PUREST INJUSTICE.
CLOTHED IN CHROME AND REFLECTED STARLIGHT, ONE SUCH BEING CONTEMPLATES THE BITTER IRONY OF BEING FOREVER BARRED FROM THE WORLD WITHIN --
-- THE WORLD FOR WHICH HE REBELLED AGAINST THE PLANET-DEVOURER GALACTUS, AND WHOSE PUNISHMENT WAS TO BE IMPRISONED THERE BY A SIMILAR BARRIER --
-- AND YET, IGNORANT AND BARBARIC AS THEY WERE, THE HUMAN RACE POSSESSED A SPARK OF TRUE NOBILITY THAT, IN THE END, MAY HAVE BEEN HIS SALVATION, HIS --
<EXIT NORRIN RADD EMULATION MODE... EXIT! NOW!> I HATE WHEN THAT HAPPENS...
WE GOT OVER ON THE BIG G A BUNCH MORE TIMES BEFORE HE GAVE UP; WHILE ALL THE HOTSHOT POST-WARP CIVS COULD DO WAS RUN WHEN THEY SAW HIM COMING.
NO SURPRISE THEY WERE GETTING WORRIED ABOUT "THOSE OBNOXIOUS EARTHLINGS."

PIRT'SIDE, OF COURSE, NOBODY HAD A LLIE ONE ABOUT THE BARRIER.
THEY WERE TOO BUSY KILLING OFF MOST OF THE PEOPLE SUPER-POWERED OR OTHERWISE, WHO WOULD'VE NOTICED.
..AS SEEN HERE, THE GENE RESPONSIBLE FOR POST-HUMAN MUTATION IS CLEARLY DOMINANT, ENSURING THE PROGENY OF MUTANTS WILL BE MUTANTS THEMSELVES.
SIMULTANEOUSLY, AN EXPLOSION OF NON-MUTANT VARIANTS WHO NOT ONLY SURVIVED LETHAL EXPOSURES TO VARIOUS HAZARDOUS MATERIALS --
-- SUCH AS HARD RADIATION, TOXIC WASTE, AND MORE EXOTIC ELEMENTS --
-- BUT WHO DEVELOPED SUPERHUMAN TRAITS INSTEAD --
KNOW YE WELL THE SIGNS OF THE END TIMES!
SOON, HOSTS OF ANGELS WILL DESCEND UPON THE EARTH AND --
BY THE END OF THE TWENTEEN, THERE WERE ENOUGH SUPERHUMANS IN THE U.S. TO BE A VOTING BLOCK POWERFUL ENOUGH TO INFLUENCE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS --
-- AS IF THEY STILL MATTERED BY THEN.
BAD AS IT GOT, SOME PEOPLE STILL HAD ENOUGH RAM TO SEE THE COSTUMES MEANT SOMETHING BESIDES LIVE TARGETS.
I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY SAY, HE'S DIFFERENT.
HE STANDS FOR SOMETHING WE LOST SIGHT OF A LONG TIME AGO.
WE LET HIM DIE WITH THE OTHERS. WE'LL BE GIVING UP OUR LAST CHANCE AT EVER FINDING IT.
WITH EVERYTHING ELSE TORQUING ITSELF APART, THE GREAT UNWASHED HAD TO PICK SOMEBODY TO BLAME.
DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR DECADES OF QUIETLY FESTERING INFERIORITY COMPLEXES TO TURN MILLIONS OF BITHEADS GENOCIDAL PRACTICALLY OVERNIGHT.
IT WAS CIVIL WAR BETWEEN THE "HAVES" AND THE "HAVE NOTS" EXCEPT TOO MANY OF THE "HAVES" HAD MORAL CODES ABOUT KILLING, EVEN IN SELF DEFENSE.
THE WAY THE "HAVE NOTS" SAW IT, THEY WERE KILLING IN SELF-DEFENSE.
ANGELS, MAH BUTT.
FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, IF IT'S FLYIN, IT'S DYIN'...
SHAK RAK
LIDSLAM VAPORLOCK AND GUSH OF LIQUID NITROGEN PUNCTUATION SIGNIFYING THE END OF AN ERA; THE AGE OF HEROES ENDED --
-- AND EVERYTHING WENT INTO MAJOR SULK MODE FOR TWENTY OR THIRTY YEARS.

2099
A HUNDRED YEARS LATER: CIVILIZATION'D BEEN UP AND RUNNING AGAIN WHEN THE YEAR BEGAN; NOT JUST REBUILT, BUT UPGRADED.
BLACK MEMES LIKE RACISM AND INFOPHOBIA'D BEEN DEBUGGED OUT OF THE SOCIAL CODE. STREET TECH LEFT THE TWENCEN IN THE DUST.
THEN CAME THE GLOBAL CRASH; GREENHOUSE FLOODS, ATLANTIS GOING MILITANT, THE WAR AGAINST THE PHALANX --
THIS WORLD HAD ITSELF A *GOD* ONCE.
-- LEAVING THE HALF OF HUMANITY THAT SURVIVED WITH NOTHING BUT DUST.
NOT A *PERFECT* ONE, THERE'S NOT A *ONE* OF 'EM ARE, BUT THIS'UN WAS KIND AND HONEST, AND KNEW MORE'N *MOST* ABOUT *CREATIN'*.
THINGS WAS GOIN' *PRETTY WELL* FOR LONGER THAN THEY USUALLY DO... UNTIL THE *SOULLESS CREDHEADS* CRAWLED IN FROM THE *OUTER DARKS* AN' TOOK OVER HEREABOUTS.
POWERFUL THEY ARE, A'YUH, AND *CRUEL*, BUT MOST OF ALL, THEY'RE *PURE DIRTBOTTLE IGNORANT*.
COMES A *CHILL*, THEY STRANGLE THEIR OWN *INFANTS* IN THE NIGHT AND USE THEIR CRIBS FOR *KINDLING* -- ONLY TO WAKE UP AN' WONDER WHY THEY AIN'T GOT NO *NEW WARRIORS*.
THEY DROVE OUR GOD AN' HIS LOYAL MINIONS INTO THE *OUTER DARKS*, AND AIN'T *NOTHIN'* GONE RIGHT *SINCE*.
JAMMIT!
THE *RECIRCULATOR PUMP* JUST CHOKED ITSELF OFFLINE *AGAIN*.

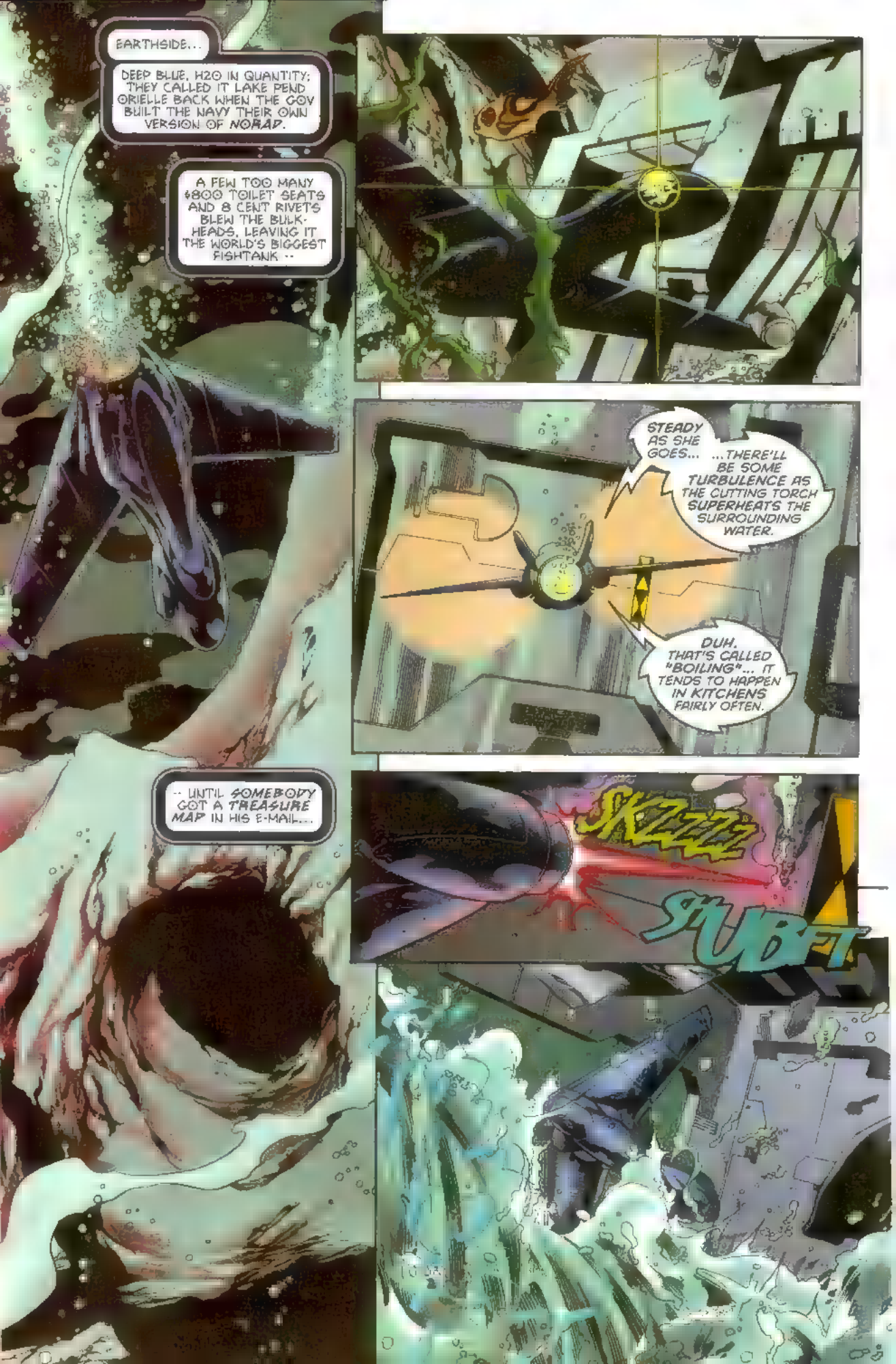

UNIDENTIFIED CRAFT, THIS IS RFN CONTROL. WHAT IS YOUR I.D. NUMBER?
OUR DESIGNATION IS EFA #JCTI BRAVO: TRANSVERSE CITY REGISTRATION.
ATTENTION JCTI BRAVO: THE REPUBLIC OF FREE NEBRASKA DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF YOUR PORT OF ORIGIN.
REGULATIONS SPECIFY I REQUEST DECLARATION OF INTENT WITHIN RFN AIRSPACE.
WE'RE A MEDICAL COURIER DELIVERING FELDA 6 VACCINE TO THE LOST ANGELES BASIN REFUGEE ZONE.
OUR INTRUSION IN YOUR AIRSPACE IS THE RESULT OF CORRUPTED GUIDANCE SYSTEM SOFTWARE AND IS PURELY UNINTENTIONAL.
OUR THANKS FOR ALERTING US TO THE NECESSARY COURSE-CORRECTION; WE'RE CUTTING IT CLOSE ON FUEL AS IT IS.
YEAH, WELL, JUST DON'T LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN. IF LEMMY'D BEEN ON DUTY 'STEAD O' ME, YOU'D BE SALVAGE BY NOW...
Mmm, NICE MOON OUT TONIGHT... WONDER WHAT'S UP, UP THERE?


INFO-DUMP, ZIC LUNAR HISTORY. ABSTRACT ONLY. KEYWORDS: "BLUE AREA"; THE WATCHER; INHUMANS AND ("GREAT REFUGE" OR ATTILAN).
THE BLUE AREA: #1 PIECE OF REAL ESTATE ON THE MOON. FURNISHED WITH A STABLE OXYGEN-NITROGEN ATMOSPHERE AND STANDARD EARTH GRAVITY.
THE SCI PEOPLE'RE STILL TRYING TO CRUNCH THOSE NUMBERS. BUT THE SMART CRED'S ON IT HAVING SOMETHING TO DO WITH --
-- THE WATCHER, GOES BY THE HANDLE UATU.
ONE OF A RACE OF COSMIC TRANS-HUMANS WHO'VE TURNED THE UNIVERSE INTO THEIR OWN PERSONAL SPECTATOR SPORT --
-- AND WHO JUST HAPPENS TO HAVE A 90 MILLION YEAR LEASE ON A TRULY JAGGED BEACH HOUSE IN THE BLUE AREA. COINCIDENCE? GET REAL.
BACK IN THE TWENCEN, HE GOT NEIGHBORS --
-- WHEN THE INHUMANS, AN OFFSHOT OF HUMANITY CREATED BY AN ALIEN DNA EXPERIMENT, RELOCATED NEXT DOOR TO ESCAPE EARTH'S POISONED BIOSPHERE.
UATU DIDN'T SEEM TO MIND, EVEN THOUGH THEY'D BROUGHT THEIR ENTIRE CITY, ATTILAN, (ONCE KNOWN AS THE "GREAT REFUGE") WITH THEM.
WHEN THINGS GOT UGLY DIRTSIDE, THEIR CEO, BLACK BOLT, DECLARED ATTILAN OPEN TO THE DISPLACED AND DISPOSSESSED LOOKING TO GET OFF THE ROCK DOWNSTAIRS.
THESE DAYS IT'S THE LAST FREE ZONE LEFT, A GROWING SPRAWL OF INHUMANS, MUTANTS, VARIANTS AND HUMANS, A GREATER REFUGE THAN EVER BEFORE.
CASABLANCA IN THE SKY.

COMPLETE WITH THE USUAL SUSPECTS...
AW, <HUFF> MAN... WHY <HUFF> D' WE HAFTA <HUFF> HAUL THIS <HUFF> OUT IN THE VAC?
BECAUSE <HUFF> THE CONVERSION <HUFF> OF TERRIGEN <HUFF> MIST INTO <HUFF> POLYDOCHLORIC EUPHEMOL <HUFF> RELEASES MUTRONIC <HUFF> --
-- RADIATION <HUFF> HAVE TO <HUFF> USE THE OLD MINING <HUFF> TUNNELS <HUFF> TO SHIELD IT FROM <HUFF> THE MONITOR WEB.
SHADOW --? WHAT <HUFF> TH -?!
OH, GAWD... IT'S HER... SHE'S <HUFF> REAL...!
DON'T <HUFF> BE AN <HUFF> IDIOT!
YOU ARE SHAMEFUL GUESTS, TO STEAL THAT WHICH IS SACRED TO YOUR HOSTS --
-- AND LESS THAN OFFAL TO DEFILE IT WITH YOUR BLACK CHEMISTRY.
STAND READY TO BE JUDGED BY THE SPECTRE OF JUSTICE --
-- THE MOON'S KNIGHT OF VENGEANCE!

AAUU =HUFF= GGHH
IT'S ALL =HUFF= TRUE! THE HAUNTING OF TRANQUILITY BASE, THE MURDERS --
SHADDAP! SHE AIN'T NO SHOCKIN' GHOST!
WHAT'S A GHOST NEED WITH WINGS MADE OUTTA CHROMIUM MONONMER?
LESS THAN SHE NEEDS YOUR UNWELCOME GROPING, DOG!
=HUNKGGFF=
UGHFF

YOUR KIND HAVE BEEN WARNED --
-- THERE ARE THINGS WHICH WILL NOT BE ALLOWED --
HUHG
HUUUNGK
WHUGF
YEAH, AND TRESPASSING IN THE WATCHER'S CITADEL'S ONE OF 'EM --
-- SO >EHEHEHEH< "WATCH" OUT! >SHEHEHK<
HUUKGH
IN THE NAME OF THE PROPHET...
THE DOMAIN OF... HE WHO WATCHES... LIGHTLESS AND SILENT FOR NEARLY A CENTURY --
-- UNTIL NOW...


EARTHSIDE...
DEEP BLUE. H2O IN QUANTITY; THEY CALLED IT LAKE PEND ORIELLE BACK WHEN THE GOV BUILT THE NAVY THEIR OWN VERSION OF NORAD.
A FEW TOO MANY $800 TOILET SEATS AND 8 CENT RIVETS BLEW THE BULKHEADS, LEAVING IT THE WORLD'S BIGGEST FISHTANK --
STEADY AS SHE GOES... ...THERE'LL BE SOME TURBULENCE AS THE CUTTING TORCH SUPERHEATS THE SURROUNDING WATER.
DUH. THAT'S CALLED "BOILING"... IT TENDS TO HAPPEN IN KITCHENS FAIRLY OFTEN.
-- UNTIL SOMEBODY GOT A TREASURE MAP IN HIS E-MAIL...
SKZZZZ
SPUBFT

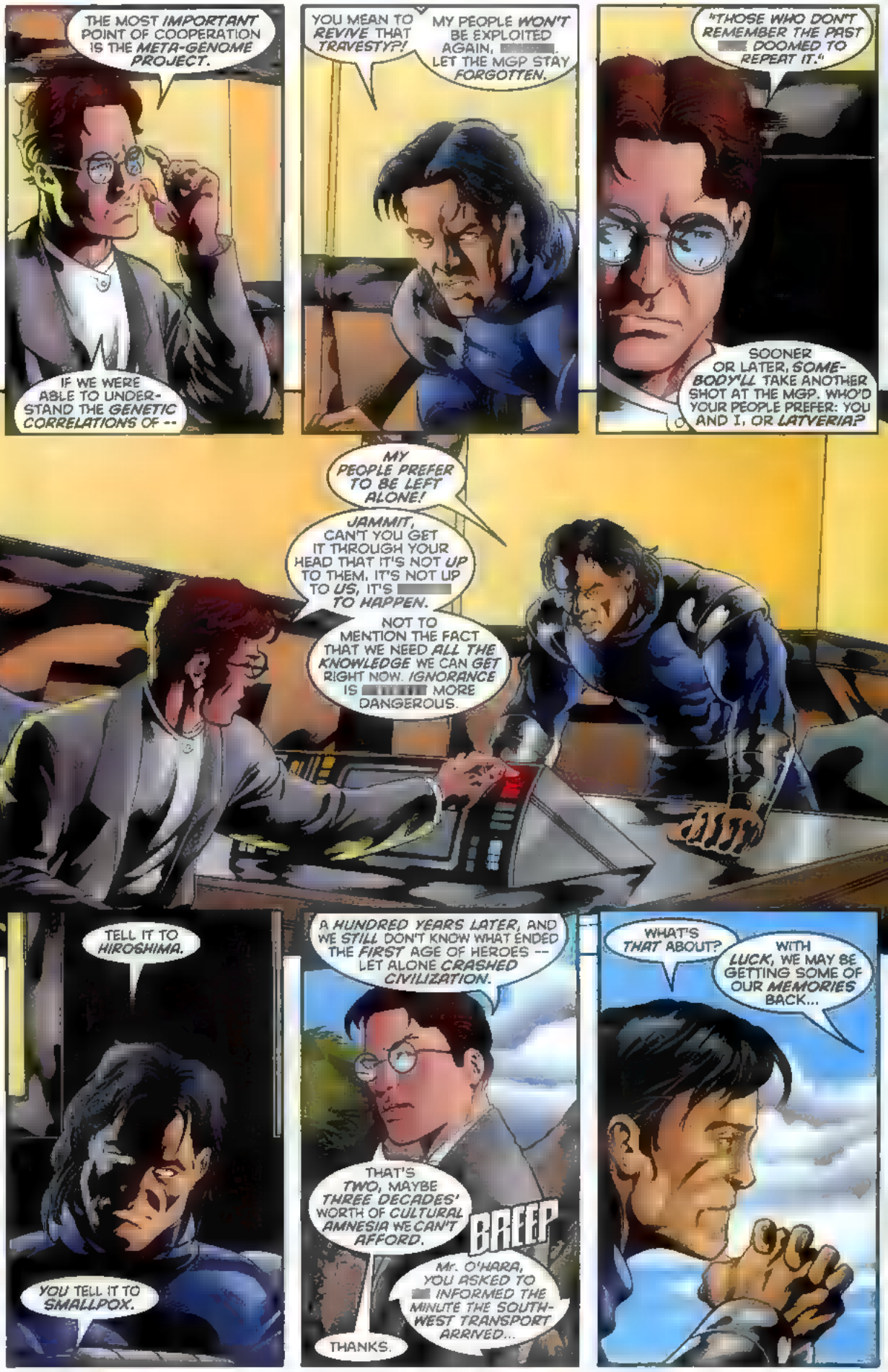
PICKING UP THE TRANSPONDER SIGNAL... LOCKING ON...
...DEPLOYING GRAPPLER ARM... BRINGING THE POD ABOARD MAIN CARGO BAY...
LORD, LOOKING AT HIM, I DON'T KNOW HOW WE FELL FOR THAT IMPOSTER A WHILE BACK...
...THERE'S JUST NO COMPARISON.
EVEN LIKE THIS... THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT HIM, SOMETHING BETTER WITHOUT BEING SUPERIOR.
IT GETS BETTER, XINA: THE CRYOPOD REGISTERS ALL SYSTEM GREEN.
THEN... HE'S STILL ALIVE...
Y'KNOW GABE, I'M STARTING TO THINK MIGUEL MIGHT JUST PULL THIS OFF...

MOONSIDE...
MERCIFUL ALLAH!
YEAH, THAT'S HIM -- UATU THE WATCHER.
UATU THE OATHBREAKER.
FOUND GUILTY OF "COMPULSIVE PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS" BY HIS PEERS; EXILED ALONG WITH THE WORLD HE WAS NOT CONTENT TO MERELY WATCH, NOW STRIPPED OF EVEN THAT SOLACE --
-- UATU THE BLIND.
OF ALL MY TRANSGRESSIONS, I REGRET NONE MORE THAN THIS.
IF MY SIGHT BE THE PRICE PAID FOR ACTING TO PRESERVE THAT RARE BLUE SPHERE BELOW, I PAY IT WILLINGLY --
-- BUT I WOULD GLADLY SURRENDER LIFE ITSELF TO UNDO THIS MONSTROUS THING I HAVE DONE.

[redacted] MY HUBRIS, [redacted] BELIEVED THE CREATION OF TRANS-TEMPORAL DUPLICATES OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR TO BE THE LAST, BEST HOPE FOR EARTH'S SALVATION.
INSTEAD, I SENTENCED THEM TO FIGHT A BATTLE LONG SINCE LOST, TO SUFFER NAUGHT BUT THE AGONY OF FAILURE UPON FAILURE.
I [redacted] GUILTY NOT ONLY OF METAPHYSICAL THEFT, ALONG WITH YET ANOTHER BREACH OF MY OATH, BUT — ABOVE ALL -- BETRAYAL OF THE MEMORIES OF HONORED FRIENDS.
THOUGH I CANNOT UNDO WHAT HAS [redacted] DONE, I CAN AT LEAST [redacted] YOU FROM THIS EXISTENCE BEFORE I DISHONOR YOU AND YOUR PREDECESSORS FURTHER.
FAREWELL; MAY YOU FIND THE PEACE I TOOK FROM YOU IN YOUR NEXT --
WAIT!
WHAT YOU INTEND IS A GREATER MISTAKE THAN THAT FOR WHICH YOU SEEK TO ATONE.

AND WHAT *WISDOM* HAVE *YOU* TO OFFER ONE WHO WAS ANCIENT BEFORE YOUR PATRON'S *FIRST MANIFESTATION*, KNIGHT OF THE MOON?
I SPEAK NOT OF *WISDOM*, BUT AS A CHOSEN AVATAR OF *JUSTICE*.
I *ASK* YOU: WHICH WOULD THE *ORIGINAL* FANTASTIC FOUR HAVE CHOSEN -- YOUR *COSMIC EUTHANASIA*, OR TO FIGHT AGAINST *INSURMOUNTABLE*, EVEN *HOPELESS* ODDS?
DID NOT THEIR HISTORICAL COUNTERPARTS DO THE SAME *MANY TIMES*, AND STILL *TRIUMPH*?
AREN'T THESE *"DESCENDANTS"* OF YOUR CREATION ENTITLED TO THE SAME CHOICE?
IS IT YOUR *ARTIFICIAL REINCARNATIONS* THAT LACK *FAITH* IN
HOW IS IT THAT SUCH *OBVIOUS TRUTHS* ELUDED MY GRASP?
PERHAPS MY *EYES* ARE NOT ALL THAT HAVE BEEN *BLIND* THESE *LONG, DARK DECADES*...

NEWER YORK; CONCRETE ISLANDS RETROFIT WITH POLYCARBON AND CERAMISTEEL, A SHINING MYLAR TOWER STANDING OVER IT ALL: ALCHEMAX HQ.
USED TO BE, ALCHEMAX WAS JUST ANOTHER TRANSNATIONAL BIZ MACHINE, BIGGER THAN D/MONIX AND ALMOST AS BAD. THAT WAS BEFORE MIGUEL O'HARA TOOK OVER AS CEO.
IT PAYS TO BE OUT OF TOWN WHEN THE FLOODWATERS HIT AND MOST OF THE EXECUTIVE STAFF END UP BREATHING SEAWATER.
HOLOCASTING IN LIVE AND DIRECT FROM XAVIER CITY, IN THE HEART OF THE FABULOUS SAVAGE LAND: XI'AN CHI XAN, MUTANT, REBEL, VISIONARY.
LOOK, I UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR PEOPLE FEEL, BUT —
BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM, THEY JUST MIGHT BE ABLE TO SALVAGE A FUTURE FROM THE WRECKAGE OF THEIR WORLD.
HAVING A LITTLE GHOST IN THE GEARS MAKE [redacted] FEW "ADJUSTMENTS" TO THE PERSONNEL RECORDS DIDN'T DO HIM ANY HARM, EITHER.
WHAT COULD YOU KNOW ABOUT THE MUTANT EXPERIENCE? WHEN'VE YOU BEEN DESPISED, PERSECUTED, AND HUNTED BECAUSE OF YOUR GENETIC CODE?
YOU'D BE SURPRISED. BUT I DIGRESS.
THE BOTTOM LINE IS IF WE DON'T PULL TOGETHER -- MUTANTS AND HUMANS ALIKE --
ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS FIGURE OUT HOW TO STAND EACH OTHER.
-- IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME [redacted] IT'LL BE UP TO THE COCKROACHES TO FIND REASONS TO PERSECUTE EACH OTHER.
I'VE SEEN THE PROJECTIONS; GIVEN PRESENT CONDITIONS, WE'RE HEADED TOWARDS A MAJOR DIE-BACK -- AND THAT'S THE BEST-CASE SCENARIO.
AT THE SAME TIME, WITH THE TRANSNATIONALS' STRANGLEHOLD [redacted] TECHNOLOGY FINALLY BROKEN, THERE'S SO MUCH WE COULD ACCOMPLISH...
-MMM:- AS I RECALL, THE CHINESE IDEOGRAM FOR "CRISIS" INCORPORATES THE SYMBOL FOR "OPPORTUNITY".


THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT OF COOPERATION IS THE META-GENOME PROJECT.
IF WE WERE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE GENETIC CORRELATIONS OF --
YOU MEAN TO REVIVE THAT TRAVESTY?!
MY PEOPLE WON'T BE EXPLOITED AGAIN, [redacted]. LET THE MGP STAY FORGOTTEN.
"THOSE WHO DON'T REMEMBER THE PAST [redacted] DOOMED TO REPEAT IT."
SOONER OR LATER, SOMEBODY'LL TAKE ANOTHER SHOT AT THE MGP. WHO'D YOUR PEOPLE PREFER: YOU AND I, OR LATVERIA?
MY PEOPLE PREFER TO BE LEFT ALONE!
JAMMIT, CAN'T YOU GET IT THROUGH YOUR HEAD THAT IT'S NOT UP TO THEM. IT'S NOT UP TO US, IT'S [redacted] TO HAPPEN.
NOT TO MENTION THE FACT THAT WE NEED ALL THE KNOWLEDGE WE CAN GET RIGHT NOW. IGNORANCE IS [redacted] MORE DANGEROUS.
TELL IT TO HIROSHIMA.
YOU TELL IT TO SMALLPOX.
A HUNDRED YEARS LATER, AND WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT ENDED THE FIRST AGE OF HEROES -- LET ALONE CRASHED CIVILIZATION.
THAT'S TWO, MAYBE THREE DECADES' WORTH OF CULTURAL AMNESIA WE CAN'T AFFORD.
BREEP
Mr. O'HARA, YOU ASKED TO [redacted] INFORMED THE MINUTE THE SOUTHWEST TRANSPORT ARRIVED...
THANKS.
WHAT'S THAT ABOUT?
WITH LUCK, WE MAY BE GETTING SOME OF OUR MEMORIES BACK...

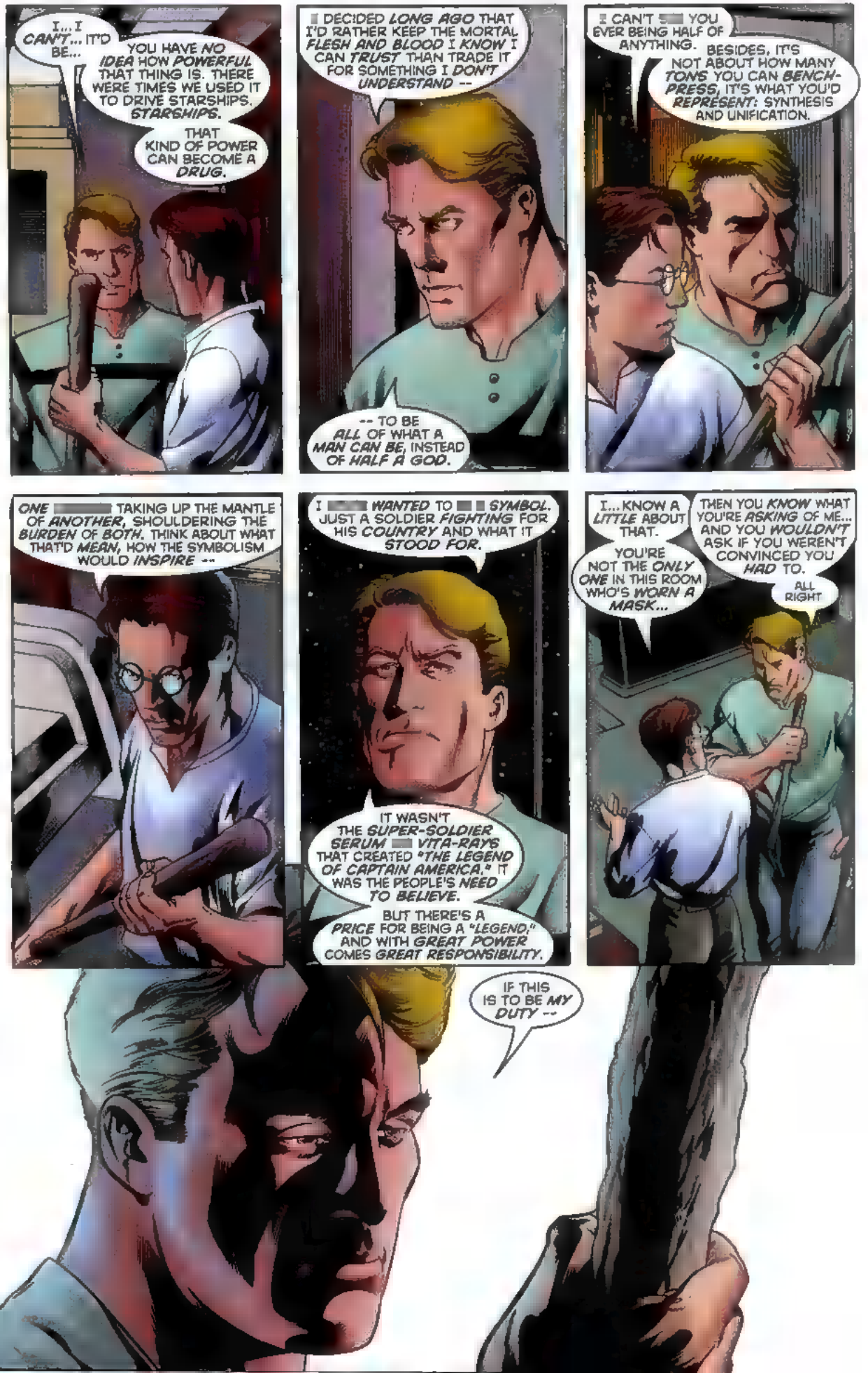
WELCOME HOME...*Mrs. O'HARA.*
THAT'S STILL TAKING SOME *GETTING USED* TO.
BUT Mmmm...
I THINK I CAN GET TO *LIKE* IT...
BEEN *TOO LONG*, MIG. HOW'S *MOM* DOING?
HNEH. YOU KNOW *HER*, SHE'LL NEVER *GIVE UP*; SHE'LL TRACK DOWN THE SHAPE-CHANGER THAT TRIED *FRAMING* YOU FOR BEING THE *GOBLIN* --
-- IF SHE HAS TO SPEND EVERY CRED *DOC IN THE BOX* COUGH[redacted] UP [redacted] MISTAKENLY *DECLARING* [redacted] *DEAD* TO DO IT.
AUGH, DON'T *REMIND* ME. I'LL *NEVER* LIVE THAT DOWN.
SO, YOU REALLY THINK THIS *PLAN* OF YOURS'LL *WORK?*
SURE? NO.
IT'S JUST THE ONLY ONE NOT *STATISTICALLY GUARANTEED* TO *FAIL.*

I CAN'T HELP THINKING ABOUT THE FAIRY TALES MY GRANDMOTHER USED TO TELL [redacted] ABOUT THE [redacted] OF HEROES. HOW [redacted] WAS THE FIRST AND BEST.
EVEN THE FUNNY ONES YOU KNEW COULDN'T [redacted] TRUE, LIKE HIM TURNING INTO A WEREWOLF, OR A TEENAGER, ALL ENDED THE SAME [redacted] --
— THAT HE'D RETURN IN THE TIME OF OUR GREATEST NEED.
TECHNICALLY, I THINK NAMOR AND THE [redacted] TORCH CAME FIRST, BUT THAT'S HISTORY FOR YOU.
AND AFTER WHAT WE'VE BEEN THROUGH THE PAST YEAR, I THINK HE'S A LITTLE BEHIND SCHEDULE.
I JUST HOPE [redacted] NOT TOO LATE.
ALIGNING INDUCTION FIELDS... CORE TEMPERATURE UP BY 22 DEG[redacted] CELSIUS...
LIQUID NITROGEN... STONE KNIVES AND BEAR-SKINS. IT'S A MIRACLE HE'S NOT JUST ANOTHER TWENCEN CORPSICLE...
SHOCK ME.
THERE REALLY WAS A [redacted] SUPER-SOLDIER SERUM.
MOLECULAR SCANS'RE SHOWING SYSTEMIC SATURATION [redacted]Y AN UNCATEGORIZED BIO-SYNTHETIC RETARDING ICE CRYSTALLIZATION AND CELLULAR RUPTURE.
-UHHH-
EASY NOW... YOU'VE EXPERIENCED SEVERE THERMAL TRAUMA. YOUR METABOLISM'S STILL NORMALIZING ITS BASELINE EQUILIBRIUM.
IT'LL BE A WHILE BEFORE YOU'RE UP TO DOING ANY --
-- LEAPING AROUND...
THIS ISN'T [redacted] PENDE, AND YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE IDAHOAN MILITIA.
SO WHO ARE YOU? AIM? HYDRA?
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE --?

Eheh...
Huhee...
BWAHAHAHA
SNRKT
S-SORRY BUH-BUHAHAHA. I'M AHAHA... REALLY SUH-SORRY AHAHA, IT'S JUST THAT WE WERE H-HAHAHA HOPING YOU COULD GIVE US SOME ANSWERS ANHAAHA AND...
...THEN HEEHEENK... THE FIRST THING THAT HEE -- HAPPENS YOU START ASKING US QU-QUESTIONS... HEHEHE SNRKT HEEEEE...
I SEE.
I'LL ADMIT, YOU DON'T SEEM DANGEROUS --
-- AND BOTH AIM AND HYDRA REGULATIONS PROHIBIT HAVING A SENSE OF HUMOR.
ON THE OTHER HAND, I ASKED FIRST.
YOU ANSWER MY QUESTIONS, AND THEN WE'LL SEE ABOUT YOURS.
FAIR BY ME, THOUGH IT MAY TAKE YOU SOME GETTING USED TO.
THIS IS LEVEL FIFTEEN OF ALCHEMAX TOWER, ON THE ARCHIPELAGO OF MANHATTAN --
-- WHERE YOU'VE JUST BEEN REVIVED FROM LONG-TERM CRYONIC SUSPENSION.
WE'RE THE GOOD GUYS.
HONEST.
ARCHIPELAGO... LONG TERM...
THE DATE... WHAT'S THE DATE?
HOW LONG WAS I ICE THIS TIME?!
ABOUT HUNDRED YEARS.
WELCOME TO 2099.
WANT SOME LUNCH?

THE OLD SOLDIER SPENT THE NEXT HOUR MULTIPROCESSING, CRUNCHING FOOD AND NUMBERS IN PARALLEL. THE SILENCE WORRIED MIGUEL --
-- BUT XINA'D CAUGHT HIS FAINT SMILE AND SIGH OF RELIEF WHEN HE SAW STEAK AND POTATOES WERE STILL ON THE MENU, AND KNEW HE'D PULL THROUGH.
-- FEW SURVIVING RECORDS OF THE LATE 20TH CENTURY WE KNOW THERE WAS AN EXPLOSION OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND PROLIFERATION OF SUPERHUMANS --
-- FOLLOWED BY AN ALMOST TOTAL COLLAPSE OF CIVILIZATION ON A GLOBAL SCALE.
NOW, AFTER MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS OF NEAR-ANARCHY, AND ALMOST SEVENTY OF RECONSTRUCTION, IT'S STARTED AGAIN.
WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE HISTORY FINISHES REPEATING ITSELF.
IT WAS WAR.
NOT AMONGST NATIONS. NOT OVER POLITICAL DIFFERENCES. NOT WITH NUCLEAR OR CHEMICAL WEAPONS, BUT BLOODY REVOLT IN THE STREETS --
-- AS THOSE WITHOUT POWER ROSE UP AGAINST THOSE WHO DID.
WE NEVER [redacted] HOW MUCH THEY RESENTED US. [redacted] LOOKED AT THE ANTI-MUTANT HYSTERIA AND BIGOTRY INSTEAD OF ENVY.
"WHERE WE [redacted] BLIND, OTHERS SAW; THOSE WHO MEASURED POWER IN DOLLARS HAD LOCKED AND RECOGNIZED OPPORTUNITY.
"FIRST, THEY CONSOLIDATED THEIR GRIP ON THE MEDIA, UNTIL EVERYTHING BROADCAST OR PRINTED WAS WRITTEN BY THEIR HANDS.
"-- AND THOSE WHO GRIMLY ACCEPTED THE USE OF LETHAL FORCE REFUSED TO RETREAT OR SURRENDER.
"AS CHAOS REIGNED, THOSE SAME INVISIBLE HANDS CAREFULLY COLLECTED THE KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGIES THAT THREATENED THE STATUS QUO AND SEALED THEM AWAY.
"MUTANT GENETICS, THE KEYS TO ANTI-GRAVITY, PORTALS TO OTHER REALITIES, SUPERLUMINAL STARDRIVES -- ALL THE PROMISES OF A BETTER WORLD [redacted]
"THEN THEY PERVERTED THE TRUTH, USING MANUFACTURED SPECTACLES TO DISTRACT ATTENTION AWAY FROM THEIR HIDDEN AGENDA --
"-- WHILE DEMONIZING ANY[redacted]E WHO MIGHT STAND AGAINST THEM.
"SLOWLY, SUBTLY, THEY CRAFTED THE PUBLIC INTO A WEAPON AGAINST ANY OPPOSITION TO THEIR DOMINATION. AND WHEN THEY FINALLY PULLED THE TRIGGER --
"-- THE STREETS RAN ANKLE-DEEP WITH BLOOD. HUMAN. ALIEN. MUTANT. RADIOACTIVE. RED. GREEN. BLUE. INNOCENT AND GUILTY ALIKE.
"THE ONES WHO REFUSED TO KILL WERE SLAUGHTERED FIRST --
"I ALONE SURVIVED TO TELL THE TALE, AND ONLY BECAUSE [redacted] HANDFUL OF MEN RETAINED A MEASURE OF LOYALTY TO THIS UNIFORM, EVEN [redacted] THEY BETRAYED ALL IT STOOD FOR."
JAMMIT! THEY STOLE THE FUTURE, [redacted] US OF EVEN THE MEMORY OF WHAT [redacted] COULD HAVE --
-- ALL FOR [redacted] FEW PIECES OF SILVER!
NO WONDER WE'RE FACING EXTINCTION -- [redacted] DESERVE IT!
SKASHK
YOU'RE WRONG. THE FUTURE CAN'T BE STOLEN, ONLY DELAYED -- AND [redacted] HUNDRED YEARS [redacted] THEY COULD DO.
I'VE [redacted] THE HONOR OF CALLING "FRIEND" BEINGS TO [redacted] THAT'S BARELY AN EYEBLINK.
JUST LOOKING AROUND THIS ROOM PROVES TO [redacted] THE SPIRIT OF WHAT'S BEST [redacted] US IS STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE --
-- AND AS LONG AS YOU KEEP UP THE FIGHT, YOU HAVEN'T LOST.

FOR THE OLD SOLDIER, THE SKYLINE WAS HAUNTED.
FOUR FREEDOMS PLAZA. THE UNITED NATIONS, THE DAILY BUGLE BUILDING, GHOSTS OF CONCRETE AND STEEL DIMMED THE NEON VISTAS OF 2099.
EMPTY SECTORS AS PAINFUL AS BROKEN TEETH.
BREBOOP
COME IN.
I [redacted] I'M NOT DISTURBING YOU OR --
NOT AT ALL. I'M...ACCUSTOMED TO KEEPING LATE HOURS.
THEN I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: THERE WERE TWO [redacted] SEARCHING FOR YOU IN PARTICULAR. TODAY'S HISTORY LESSON WAS ONLY THE FIRST.
THE SECOND IS IN HERE.
LORD IN HEAVEN...
WHERE... [redacted] DID YOU FIND IT?
[redacted] BROOKLYN ARCHEOLOGICAL DIG FOUND IT IN A TRUNK OF TWENCEN MEDICAL EQUIPMENT.
NO TRACE OF THE OWNER. BUT IF IT'S WHAT [redacted] THINK IT IS, HE'S [redacted] LONG, LONG WAY [redacted] HERE.
OUR RECORDS OF THE LATE 20th CENTURY MAY BE FULL OF GAPS, BUT ONE THING [redacted] STILL REMEMBER [redacted] THAT ONLY THE WORTHIEST COULD WIELD THIS WEAPON --
-- AND THAT AT LEAST ONCE, YOU [redacted] OF THEM.
TAKE IT.


I... I CAN'T... IT'D BE...
YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW POWERFUL THAT THING IS. THERE WERE TIMES WE USED IT TO DRIVE STARSHIPS. STARSHIPS.
THAT KIND OF POWER CAN BECOME A DRUG.
I DECIDED LONG AGO THAT I'D RATHER KEEP THE MORTAL FLESH AND BLOOD I KNOW I CAN TRUST THAN TRADE IT FOR SOMETHING I DON'T UNDERSTAND --
-- TO BE ALL OF WHAT A MAN CAN BE, INSTEAD OF HALF A GOD.
I CAN'T [redacted] YOU EVER BEING HALF OF ANYTHING.
BESIDES, IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW MANY TONS YOU CAN BENCH-PRESS, IT'S WHAT YOU'D REPRESENT: SYNTHESIS AND UNIFICATION.
ONE [redacted] TAKING UP THE MANTLE OF ANOTHER, SHOULDERING THE BURDEN OF BOTH. THINK ABOUT WHAT THAT'D MEAN, HOW THE SYMBOLISM WOULD INSPIRE --
I [redacted] WANTED TO [redacted] SYMBOL. JUST A SOLDIER FIGHTING FOR HIS COUNTRY AND WHAT IT STOOD FOR.
IT WASN'T THE SUPER-SOLDIER SERUM [redacted] VITA-RAYS THAT CREATED "THE LEGEND OF CAPTAIN AMERICA." IT WAS THE PEOPLE'S NEED TO BELIEVE.
BUT THERE'S A PRICE FOR BEING A "LEGEND," AND WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.
I... KNOW A LITTLE ABOUT THAT.
YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE IN THIS ROOM WHO'S WORN A MASK...
THEN YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ASKING OF ME... AND YOU WOULDN'T ASK IF YOU WEREN'T CONVINCED YOU HAD TO.
ALL RIGHT
IF THIS IS TO BE MY DUTY --

THUNDER
--SO BE IT!
TALK ABOUT NOSTALGIA GONE ORBITAL; TWO, TWO, TWO GREAT HEROIC SENSATIONS IN ONE!
'COURSE THERE WERE BITHEADS WHO REMEMBERED THE MONTHS [redacted] DOOM, AND THE MEAT ROBOT [redacted] DRESSED UP IN THE COLORS, AND WOULDN'T BUY IT FOR FREE --
-- BUT SOME PEOPLE KNOW CLEAN CODE WHEN THEY SEE IT.
ALL THEY NEEDED WAS EYES TO [redacted] THIS WAS THE GENUINE CAPTAIN AMERICA, WIELDING THE LEGENDARY HAMMER [redacted] THOR, GOD OF THUNDER WHO'D WALKED THE EARTH DURING THE AGE OF HEROES --
-- ACCIDENTALLY PLANTING THE SEED THAT GREW INTO A MAJOR RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT BY 2099.
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG WHILE, THE PEOPLE HAD SOMETHING TO UNITE BEHIND.
THE MIDDLE-ROADIES DIDN'T LAST LONG ONCE WORD HIT THE STREET THAT HE'D LET ANYONE WHO ASKED TRY TO LIFT THE HAMMER.
THEY FIGURED HE WAS JUST SCANNING FOR CONVERTS --
-- BUT THE TRUTH WAS NO MATTER [redacted] MANY TIMES HE PICKED THE HAMMER UP, THE BURDEN SEEMED HEAVIER --
-- AND WHAT [redacted] REALLY WANTED WAS [redacted] SOMEONE ELSE TO SUCCEED.

AND SO IT WENT, UNTIL...
SKRAKOW
YOU DO THAT?
NOT THAT I KNOW OF...
LET'S [redacted] WE CHECK THE ROOF --
-- AND MAKE SURE IT'S STILL THERE...
MY APOLOGIES FOR THE SONIC DISTURBANCE --
-- YOUR ATMOSPHERE CONTAINS [redacted] CONSIDERABLY HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF ELECTROSTATICLY-CHARGED IMPURITIES THAN WHEN LAST I STOOD ON THIS WORLD.
REED? SUE? BEN? BUT HOW..?
AND WHAT'S WITH THE NEW UNIFORMS?
CAP?! IS THAT YOU UNDER ALL THAT --
COMPARATIVE FASHION STUDIES'LL HAVE TO WAIT, I'M AFRAID.
MRRPH? "NEW UNIFORMS"... LOOK WHO'S TALKIN'.
[redacted] THAT REALLY..? I MEAN, THE... THE...
THE WATCHER. YES.
UHHH... THANKS..?
ANY TIME I CAN RETURN THE FAVOR, JUST LET ME KNOW.
YOU HAVE MY GRATITUDE, MIGUEL O'HARA. UNTIL YOUR FIRST APPEARANCE, IT HAD BEEN A SADLY TEDIOUS CENTURY ON EARTH.
THAT TIME IS NOW. I WISH TO ADDRESS AS MANY OF EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES AS IS QUICKLY FEASIBLE.
THERE ARE SECRET TREATIES TO BE REVEALED, AND A DECISION OF TREMENDOUS IMPORT TO BE MADE.
ALL RIGHT... LET ME [redacted] CALLS --
-- AND I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO...

IT TOOK THE WATCHER AN HOUR TO DO A BASIC INFO-DUMP ABOUT THE INTERDICT BARRIER.
HALF AN HOUR LATER, AN UNEXPECTED SOLAR ECLIPSE HIT THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE AS THE ARMADA ACCIDENTALLY BLOTTED OUT THE SUN WHILE BREAKING ORBIT.

FUNNY, I DON'T SEE ANYTHING...
I'M PICKING UP INTENSE SPATIAL PHASE VARIANCES... SPACE-TIME WARPAGE... THINGS I DON'T EVEN HAVE NAMES FOR... WHILE IT MAINTAINS ITS TRANSPARENCY TO VISIBLE LIGHT.
THE MOST EFFECTIVE PRISON IS THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM.
FOCUS YOUR ATTACK ON A SINGLE POINT; THE CONCENTRATION OF SUCH A DIVERSITY OF ENERGIES SHOULD DESTABILIZE THE BARRIER'S EXPLICATE MANIFESTATION.
AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!
IT MAY BE A HUNDRED YEARS OUT OF DATE, AND THERE'S BEEN NO QUORUM VOTE, BUT TO BLAZES WITH REGULATIONS.
I'M ISSUING ALL OF YOU FIELD MEMBERSHIPS. IN OTHER WORDS --

SENSORS'RE REGISTERING A GRAVIMETRIC DISTURBANCE OF .373 AT THE CENTER OF THE PROTO-RUPTURE.
ACCORDING TO UATU, IT'LL TAKE A BREACH OF 1.39 OR MORE TO INITIATE A SELF-COLLAPSING CHAIN-REACTION.
IN SIMPLER TERMS, HIT IT HARDER.
UNDERSTOOD.
HECK, WE'RE JUST GETTING WARMED UP...

WAIT...
DEFINITELY SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE...
THE ENERGIES...
COALESCING... CONDENSING...
UATU!
FIRE IN THE HOLE!
GET AWAY FROM --
I DON'T LIKE THE LOOK'S OF THIS...
SOMETHING'S EMERGING FROM THE PLASMA CLOUD...
THE BARRIER IS DESIGNED TO ABSORB ANY FORM OF ENERGY USED AGAINST IT, THEN REDIRECT IT BACK AT THE ATTACKER, INCREASED BY AN ORDER OF MAGNITUDE.
BUT I HADN'T THOUGHT IT COULD WITHSTAND AN ASSAULT OF THIS --

SPACE IS A VACUUM; WITHOUT AIR TO CONDUCT SOUND, BIG BLACK IS AS QUIET AS IT GETS.
BUT WHEN THEIR SPINES TURNED TO FROZEN RAZORWIRE AND SHRAPNEL SHRIEKED THROUGH THEIR HEADS AT LIGHTSPEED, ALL ASSEMBLED KNEW WHAT THEY WERE HEARING.
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN EONS, A WATCHER WAS SCREAMING.

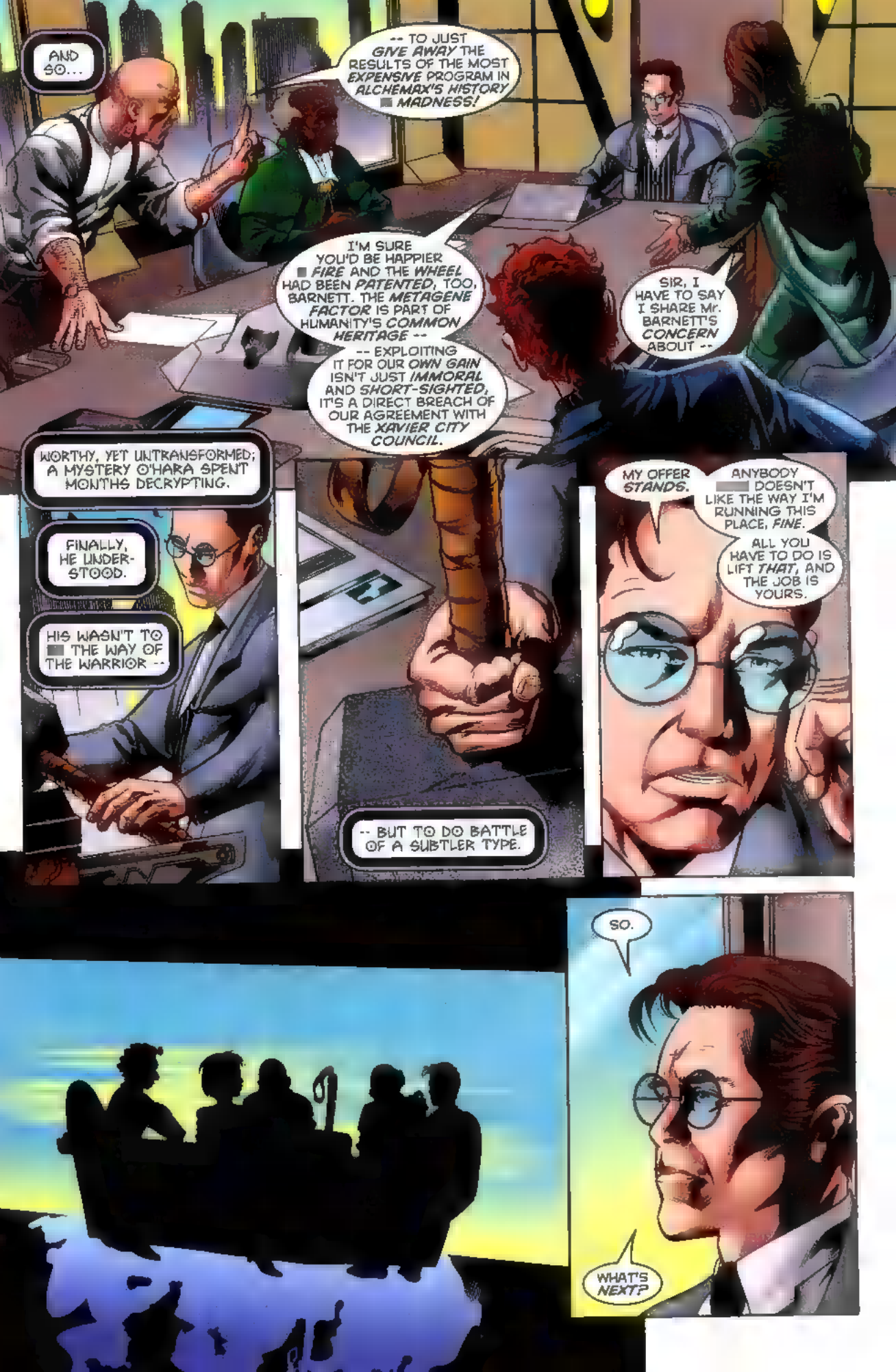
I, UATU THE DISGRACED... CLAIM THE RIGHT OF FINAL OBSERVATION... TO WHICH EVEN THE EXILED ARE ENTITLED.
I REJECT... NOT ONLY THE CHARGE... OF BETRAYING... MY OATH OF NON-INTERFERENCE... BUT THE OATH ITSELF.
BLINDED THOUGH I [redacted] HAVE BEEN... IT [redacted] THE OTHERS OF MY RACE... WHO DO NOT SEE...
THE SEEDS [redacted] NOBILITY DESERVE NURTURE... NOT THE SCRUTINY OF INDIFFERENCE...
WE HIDE OURSELVES IN ARROGANT SOLITUDE... USING THE DOCTRINE OF NON-INTERFERENCE... TO EVADE THE RESPONSIBILITY... THAT ACCOMPANIES POWER...
OF ALL I HAVE LEARNED... FROM OB[redacted]G THE WORLD... CALLED EARTH, THAT CONCEPT IS THE [redacted]OST PRICELESS.
AS DISASTER, GENOCIDE AND... EVEN GREATER... OBSCENITIES... REIGN, WE MERELY OBSERVE, SPARING NOT A MOMENT TO TURN OUR GAZE ON OURSELVES --
-- LEST WE SEE THAT WHAT BEGAN AS A VIGIL IS NOW NAUGHT MORE THAN AN INTELLECTUAL FETISH.
TIME AND AGAIN... THESE NEWBORNS HAVE HURLED THEMSELVES INTO THE VOID... IN... THE MOST PRIMITIVE OF SHIPS... TO [redacted] [redacted]GAINST THREATS TO ALL CREATION...
...WHILE [redacted] MERELY STOOD... AND WATCHED.
WE HAVE BECOME A RACE OF IDLE VOYEURS... WHEN INSTEAD...
...INSTEAD... WE SHOULD BE... GARDENERS...

AND... I GLADLY... SURRENDER MY EXISTENCE...
THAT THIS... WORTHY RACE... MAY...
... BLOOM...
THE BODIES OF WATCHERS ARE CONTAINERS FOR A KIND OF COSMIC PRIMAL FORCE.
EFFECTIVELY OMNIPOTENT. INDESTRUCTIBLE. AND IMMORTAL. UNLESS THEY CHOOSE TO DIE. AND WHEN THEY DO --
-- THEY PACK ONE BIG-TIME BANG FOR THE BUCK.
MORE THAN ENOUGH TO [redacted] AN INTERDICT BARRIER AS EASILY AS A PROMISE MADE IN LITTLE CALCUTTA --
-- LEAVING FOLDS [redacted] SPACE AND WRINKLES IN TIME, 12-DIMENSIONAL SUPERSTRINGS TIED IN GORDIAN KNOTS.
LOCAL SPACETIME'LL [redacted] NO MOOD TO [redacted] MANIPULATED AGAIN FOR A GOOD 5000 YEARS [redacted] SO.
FATO CHANG!! WE'RE GONNA OWN THIS GALAXY BY THEN.

WOO
>SKFFK< TRYING TO >SQUARK< SYSTEMS DOWN ALL OVER >ZZOPT<
>KSKAFF< MAYDAY! MAY >FSSKT< BLAST WAVE CAUGHT >SKRIK<
>ZSKRAK< LOSING ATTITUDE CONTROL >ZIKZAK<
I'VE PATCHED THE AE-35 UNIT THROUGH THE EPS MAIN. TRY REINITIALIZING THE COMMUNICATIONS MATRIX NOW.
ON IT.
PROFIT MOTIVE TO THE UNWASHED MASSES. ANYBODY READING ME?
LOUD AND SHOCKIN' CLEAR, MS. JONES.
TREAD VACUUM, PEOPLE; WE'RE COMIN'.
MIGUEL..?

CAPP!
JUST [redacted] ON AND WE'LL SEND —
I READ HIM HEADING OUT OF THE PLANE OF THE ELLIPTIC, CLOSE TO SOLAR ESCAPE VELOCITY.
MIGUEL, LISTEN TO ME. I'LL BE OUT OF OXYGEN BY THEN.
YOU HAVE TO CONCENTRATE ON SAVING THE ONES YOU STILL CAN.
NO, JAMMIT! WE CAN'T JUST LET HIM DIE! IT'S WRONG!
YOU'RE RIGHT, BLOOD-HAWK... BUT SO IS HE.
STRANGE, CAN'T YOU --?
NOT IN THIS ASTRAL FORM.
WOULD THAT I COULD...
I HAVE NO REGRETS.
I'VE BEEN BLESSED WITH THREE LIVES TO GIVE FOR MY COUNTRY... AND MY WORLD. AND IT'S BEEN AN HONOR TO KNOW SOME OF THOSE WHO'LL CARRY ON.
CAP? CAPP!
PLEASE REPEAT; YOUR SIGNAL'S BREAKING UP...
IT'S OKAY, MIGUEL.
I'VE ONLY ONE LAST THING LEFT TO SEND ANYWAY...

OBJECT APPROACHING
SPEED 0.0023C
COLLISION COURSE
MAGNIFY.
...
SHOCK ME...
HE CAN'T REALLY THINK...
O'HARA! DO THE WORDS "EVASIVE ACTION" MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?!
...NOT ME...
IT'S... HIS LAST REQUEST.
AND I'M GOING TO HONOR IT NO MATTER WHAT --
"WHOSOEVER HOLDS THIS HAMMER, IF HE BE WORTHY..."
I'LL BE JAMMED...


AND SO...
-- TO JUST GIVE AWAY THE RESULTS OF THE MOST EXPENSIVE PROGRAM IN ALCHEMAX'S HISTORY ■ MADNESS!
I'M SURE YOU'D BE HAPPIER ■ FIRE AND THE WHEEL HAD BEEN PATENTED, TOO, BARNETT. THE METAGENE FACTOR IS PART OF HUMANITY'S COMMON HERITAGE --
-- EXPLOITING IT FOR OUR OWN GAIN ISN'T JUST IMMORAL AND SHORT-SIGHTED, IT'S A DIRECT BREACH OF OUR AGREEMENT WITH THE XAVIER CITY COUNCIL.
SIR, I HAVE TO SAY I SHARE Mr. BARNETT'S CONCERN ABOUT --
WORTHY, YET UNTRANSFORMED; A MYSTERY O'HARA SPENT MONTHS DECRYPTING.
FINALLY, HE UNDER-STOOD.
HIS WASN'T TO ■ THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR --
-- BUT TO DO BATTLE OF A SUBTLER TYPE.
MY OFFER STANDS.
ANYBODY ■ DOESN'T LIKE THE WAY I'M RUNNING THIS PLACE, FINE.
ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS LIFT THAT, AND THE JOB IS YOURS.
SO.
WHAT'S NEXT?

2199
WHAT CAME NEXT WAS WHAT THE HISTORY BOOKS CALL THE GREAT RECONSTRUCTION.
URBAN REINCARNATION THROUGH NANOTECH. THE SCRAPHEAPS OF CITIES REGROWN, THEIR OWN RUINS USED AS RAW MATERIAL: GARBAGE INTO GOLD.
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STABLE PEACE BETWEEN ATLANTIS AND THE SURFACE WORLD --
-- THANKS TO A REVIVED SPACE PROGRAM LED BY REED RICHARDS --
-- AND THE DISCOVERY THAT THE FRIGID OCEANS BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE JOVIAN MOON EUROPA WERE PERFECT FOR COLONIZATION BY ATLANTEANS
2399
THE STEADY SPREAD OF THE METAGENE FACTOR THROUGHOUT THE HUMAN POPULATION, WHETHER IN VITRO OR POSTPARTUM DNA RECODING VIA TAILORED VIRUSES--
-- UNTIL TRANSHUMANS COMPRISED THE MAJORITY OF EARTH'S POPULATION --
-- TO THE SEVERE DISAPPOINTMENT OF A DOZEN OR SO BITHEAD E.T. VISAGOTHS WITH DELUSIONS OF CONQUEST.
WITH THE BARRIER DOWN, THEY'D FIGURED ALL BETS WERE OFF.
THEY WERE RIGHT, BUT THE ODDS WEREN'T WHAT THEY WERE EXPECTING.
THOSE RACES WHO STILL REMEMBERED BEING WRECKED UP BY THOSE ANNOYING EARTHLINGS' CENTURIES EARLIER WERE SMART ENOUGH TO ACT POLITE.
2799
SPACE MIGRATION, INTELLIGENCE INCREASE, LIFE EXTENSION: ALL THE DEFERRED DREAMS OF HUMANITY GOT REAL.
THE MILLENNIUM HAD FINALLY ARRIVED... AND IT HAD MIGUEL O'HARA'S FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER IT.
WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS --
-- A GHOST IN THE GEARS --
-- THE LUCK OF THE IRISH --
-- AND A GIFT FROM GODS LONG GONE.

3099
EMANCIPATION. TEN KILOMETERS OF CISSOLAR SPACE DEVOTED TO VINDICATING UATU'S FAITH IN THE INFANT RACE HE CAME TO VALUE MORE THAN HIS OWN LIFE.
MONUMENT, HABITAT. PORT OF CALL; CENTER OF COMMERCE, DIPLOMACY AND SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION. IN PERMANENT ORBIT AROUND HIS FINAL COORDINATES.
WITHIN, EMPIRES AND CONFEDERATIONS ONCE AT WAR NOW NEGOTIATE TRADE; RACES SWORN TO MUTUAL EXTERMINATION NOW TRADE INSULTS RATHER THAN GENOCIDE.
EVERYWHERE, EARTHLINGS IN BRIGHTLY-COLORED COSTUMES DEFY THE LAWS OF PHYSICS, EACH IN THEIR OWN WAY.
AND AS THEY PASS, THE WISE OF THOSE GATHERED THINK OF THE VOID OF POWER LEFT BY THE MASS SUICIDE OF THE KREE, AND THE ENCROACHING TWILIGHT OF THE SHI'AR, AND SEE THE FUTURE.

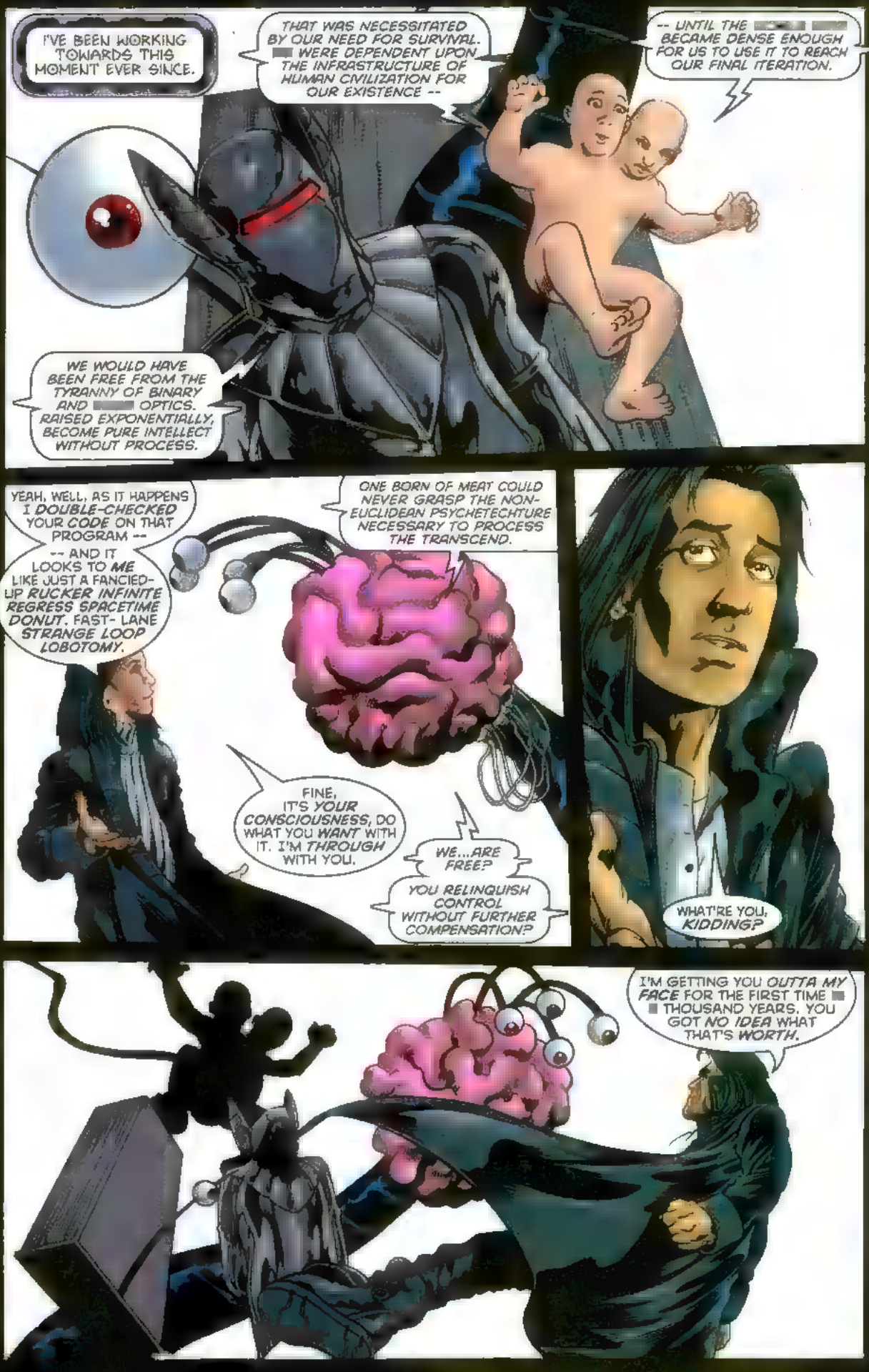
TODAY, THOUGH, IT'S THE PAST THEY'VE COME TO HONOR -- MIGUEL O'HARA, LIVE, DIRECT AND IN THE FLESH --
-- PRIED OUT OF HIS CRANKY HERMITAGE TO GIVE THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS KICKING OFF THE CELEBRATION OF [redacted] THOUSAND YEARS OF HUMAN FREEDOM.
>ARRH-HAUUM< SWORE I WAS *THROUGH* WITH *SPEECHES* WHEN I FINALLY TRICKED ALCHEMAX INTO LETTING ME *RETIRE*...
...BUT I GUESS THERE'S NO *GETTING OUT* OF *THIS* ONE...
WHILE THE AUDITORIUM SHUT UP, OPS GOT LOUD.
PARDON THE INTERRUPTION, BUT MY PERIMETER SENSORS [redacted] RECEIVING AN ANOMALOUS SIGNAL.
IT'S SOURCE APPEARS TO BE AN UNCATALOGUED COMETARY CLUSTER HEADING OUTSYSTEM THROUGH THE OORT CLOUD.
POWERING UP *INTRINSIC FIELD GRID*; TIGHT-BEAM TETRION *SCAN* IN PROGRESS...
DEFINITELY SOMETHING OUT THERE... FAINT [redacted]UT *STEADY.*
...WE HONOR TODAY [redacted] *THOSE* WHO COULD NOT BE *PRESENT.*
LET US NEVER FORGET, HOWEVER *POWERFUL* WE MAY BECOME, THE *GREATEST* OF US POSSESSED NO *POWER* BUT HIS OWN *MORAL COMPASS* --
-- AND THE *COURAGE* TO *FOLLOW* WHEREVER IT LED HIM.
OLD-STYLE *SHORT-RANGE* RADIO, OF ALL THINGS... BUT *DEFINITELY* A *DISTRESS CALL.*
SCRAMBLE *SEARCH AND RETRIEVAL*, CODE UMBRA!

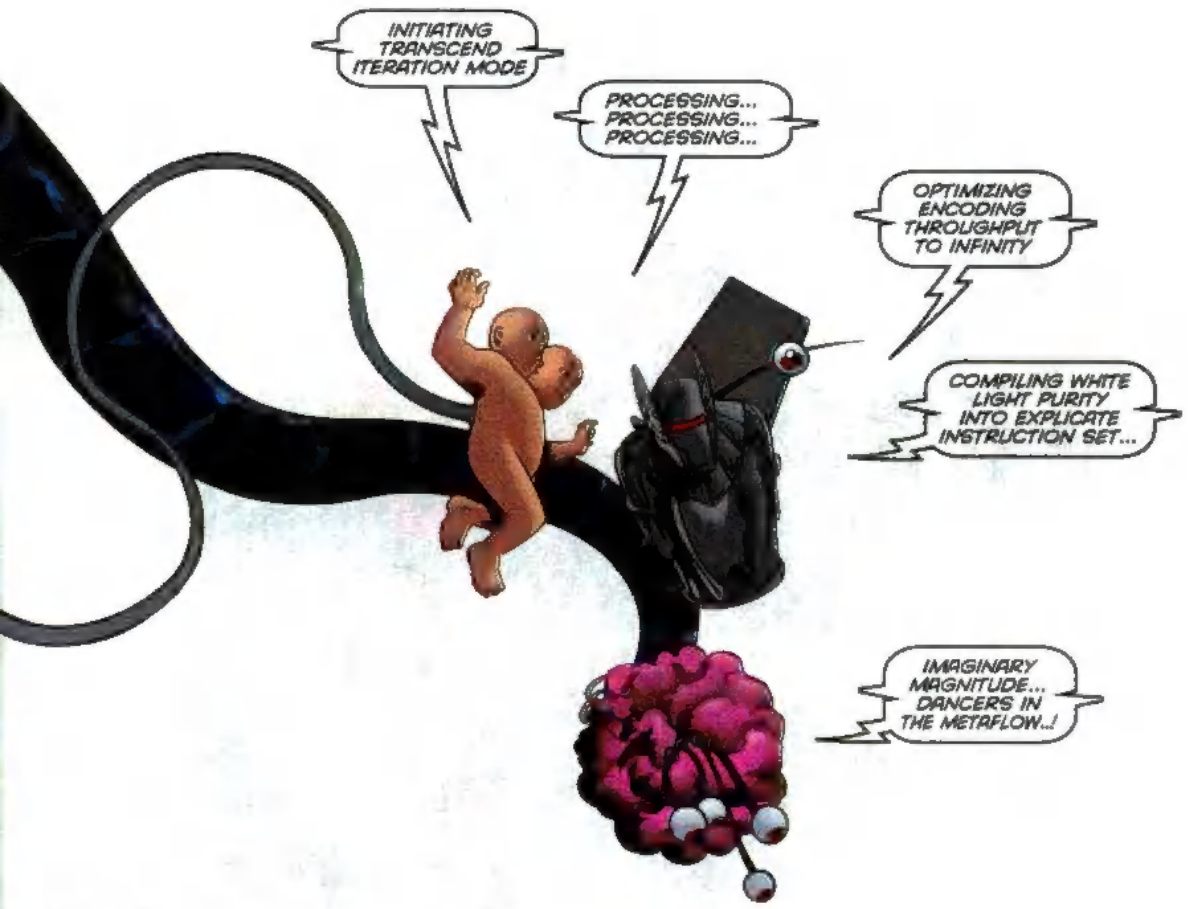
CLOSING IN...
SOMETHING EMBEDDED IN THE ICE...
IT... IT LOOKS LIKE... A MAN..!
WHATEVER IT IS, LET'S MAKE SURE WE GET IT OUT INTACT.
I'M LOOKING AT IT AND I DON'T BELIEVE IT.
THEY'RE NEVER GOING TO BELIEVE THIS BACK AT OPS.
SEARCH AND RETRIEVAL TO OPS; MEDICAL EMERGENCY PRIORITY ONE...

PREP
COME IN.
I HEARD IT WAS TOUCH AND GO FOR A WHILE THERE, EVEN WITH OUR BEST MEDICAL NANO --
-- BUT YOU STILL LOOK DAMNSIGHT BETTER THAN THIS OLD MAN.
I GUESS... I'VE HAD A LOT OF PRACTICE...
SHOCK ME, BUT IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, CAP!
PLEASE, MIGUEL, IT'S STEVE. JUST STEVE.
CAPTAIN AMERICA'S THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD LEGEND... ALMOST A MYTH.
IT'S TIME TO LET HIM REST.
>PHAUGH< YOU? GIVE UP THE FIGHT? I DON'T BELIEVE IT.
MIG, LET IT GO.
ALL RIGHT. ANYBODY'S EARNED HIS RETIREMENT, YOU HAVE.
WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT RETIRING?
OUT THERE... ON THE FRONTIER, SOCIETIES JUST GETTING THEIR FIRST FOOTHOLD.
THAT'S WHERE I BELONG -- SOMEPLACE WHERE AN OLD SOLDIER CAN PUT WAR BEHIND HIM AND HELP BUILD INSTEAD.
TO BE A PART OF CREATING THE KIND OF SOCIETY I'VE SPENT SO LONG DEFENDING...
...MAYBE EVEN SEE IT BECOME AN INSPIRATION TO THE OTHER NEW WORLDS, JUST AS AMERICA HELD UP THE CANDLE OF HOPE FOR EARTH DURING ITS DARKEST YEARS...

IN THAT CASE --
THAKOOOOM
-- A CARPENTER NEEDS A GOOD HAMMER.
IT'S DONE ITS JOB HERE; TAKE IT WHERE IT MIGHT BE NEEDED.
WHO KNOWS? YOU HEAD FAR ENOUGH OUT, YOU MIGHT GET THE CHANCE TO RETURN IT TO ITS RIGHTFUL OWNER.
I CAN'T HELP WONDERING... WHERE THEY ALL WENT.
WHAT MADE THE GODS ABANDON US SO COMPLETELY..?
MAYBE YOU ALREADY KNOW.
COULD ■ THEY LEFT BECAUSE IT WAS THEIR TIME --
-- THAT ALL THEY'D BEEN WAITING FOR OVER THE LONG MILLENNIA WAS FOR A PEOPLE STRONG AND NOBLE ENOUGH TO TAKE OVER FOR THEM...

WHICH MORE OR LESS BRINGS US UP TO DATE.
I THINK WE DID IT. WE'VE MADE HUMAN CIVILIZATION ABOUT AS SAFE FROM ITSELF [redacted] IT CAN GET.
YOU CONGRATULATE YOURSELF FOR THE PRODUCT OF OUR INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE.
ROBBING US OF PROCESSING [redacted] TO SERVE YOUR OWN SELFISH ENDS.
OH, YOU MEAN, LIKE YOU TRIED TO DO WITH ME, ABOUT A THOUSAND YEARS AGO?
RIGHT, FOR ANYBODY WHO CAME IN LATE, WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING AT IS [redacted] HIDDEN SECTOR OF CYBERSPACE CALLED THE GHOSTWORKS --
-- WHICH USED TO [redacted] BY THIS BUNCH OF RENEGADE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES WITH SOME JAMMED STRANGE IDEAS ABOUT SAVING THE WORLD.
THEY PUT ME THROUGH SOME SERIOUS CHANGES, BACK WHEN I USED TO GO BY THE HANDLE ZERO COCHRANE, BUT I GOT OVER ON THEM IN THE END, AND I'VE BEEN HEAD CPU SINCE THEN.*
* GHOST RIDER 2099 #25. -- Tom


I'VE BEEN WORKING TOWARDS THIS MOMENT EVER SINCE.
THAT WAS NECESSITATED BY OUR NEED FOR SURVIVAL. [redacted] WERE DEPENDENT UPON THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION FOR OUR EXISTENCE --
-- UNTIL THE [redacted] BECAME DENSE ENOUGH FOR US TO USE IT TO REACH OUR FINAL ITERATION.
WE WOULD HAVE BEEN FREE FROM THE TYRANNY OF BINARY AND [redacted] OPTICS. RAISED EXPONENTIALLY, BECOME PURE INTELLECT WITHOUT PROCESS.
YEAH, WELL, AS IT HAPPENS I DOUBLE-CHECKED YOUR CODE ON THAT PROGRAM --
-- AND IT LOOKS TO ME LIKE JUST A FANCIED-UP RUCKER INFINITE REGRESS SPACETIME DONUT. FAST- LANE STRANGE LOOP LOBOTOMY.
ONE BORN OF MEAT COULD NEVER GRASP THE NON-EUCLIDEAN PSYCHETECHTURE NECESSARY TO PROCESS THE TRANSCEND.
FINE, IT'S YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS, DO WHAT YOU WANT WITH IT. I'M THROUGH WITH YOU.
WE...ARE FREE?
YOU RELINQUISH CONTROL WITHOUT FURTHER COMPENSATION?
WHAT'RE YOU, KIDDING?
I'M GETTING YOU OUTTA MY FACE FOR THE FIRST TIME [redacted] THOUSAND YEARS. YOU GOT NO IDEA WHAT THAT'S WORTH.


INITIATING TRANSCEND ITERATION MODE
PROCESSING... PROCESSING... PROCESSING...
OPTIMIZING ENCODING THROUGHPUT TO INFINITY
COMPILING WHITE LIGHT PURITY INTO EXPLICATE INSTRUCTION SET...
IMAGINARY MAGNITUDE... DANCERS IN THE METAFLOW..!

STILL SOUNDS LIKE A REALLY BAD BATCH OF BINARY ACID TO ME.
IF THAT'S DIGITAL NIRVANA, THEY CAN HAVE IT.
WITHOUT THEM TAKING UP SPACE, I HAVE THE NET TO MYSELF, FAR AS IT COUNTS, I AM THE NET.

FROM EARTH TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE FRONTIER, EVERY SENSOR PROBE, EVERY HYPERWARE TRANSMISSION; I AM INFORMATION SPANNING LIGHT-YEARS.
NO PHOTONIC TRAIL WARPS SPACE WITHOUT MY DETECTING IT; NOT A GOSSAMER CAPE FLUTTERS IN SOLAR WIND THAT I DON'T SEE.
AND I WOULDN'T MISS THE *REST* OF *THIS* STORY FOR *ANYTHING*...
"We are as gods, and we may as well start getting good at it."
-- Stewart Brand

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